

An Original in Spring Mountain District

WINES FROM
SMITH-MADRONE
ARE AS AUTHENTIC
AS THEIR TERROIR

story and photos by Fred Swan



Brothers Stu (left) and Charlie Smith of Smith-Madrone.

Looking southeast across the Smith-Madrone vineyard, high atop Spring Mountain in Napa Valley.

TODAY, THE SPRING MOUNTAIN DISTRICT AVA of Napa Valley includes 1,000 acres of vines and 30-plus wineries. But only two vineyards were there in 1971 when Stu Smith bought the mountaintop parcel where he established Smith-Madrone. The property was impenetrable forest; logging was job one in his quest to grow grapes.

Stu's brother, Charlie, joined him in 1973. Together, they built the winery of rock and timber from their land. Forty-five years later, they and Stu's son, Sam, make wine in that same winery. It's authentic, charming and full of character, like their wines.

The Smiths have five varieties planted over 34 acres, mostly Cabernet Sauvignon, Riesling and Chardonnay with small amounts of Cabernet Franc and Merlot. The soil is Aiken clay loam, rust-hued and volcanic in origin. Between that, found in only 12 percent of Spring Mountain's acreage, and the range of facings, topographies and microclimates at Smith-Madrone, their terroir is truly unique.

Stu, a TA for legendary U.C. Davis professors Maynard Amerine and Vernon Singleton in 1970-71, knows a ton about viticulture and puts huge focus on the vines. "You can't make good wine from lousy grapes," he says simply. Over the years, Stu refined his plantings, adjusting rootstock, spacing, facing, trellising and variety for each block of the dry-farmed vineyard.

Winemaking at Smith-Madrone is traditional and no-nonsense, all managed by hand. "We make wines we like to drink, not so much for reviews," Charlie tells me. Production is under 4,000 cases and always 100 percent estate.

Lemon, underripe apricot, honeysuckle, green apple and a hint of petrol show in the dry, Smith-Madrone 2014 Riesling (SRP \$30). It's very long and juicy on the palate.

The Smith-Madrone 2014 Chardonnay (SRP \$32) is medium-bodied and very fresh but soft, owing to 100% ML and frequent lees stirring. Look for aromas and flavors of green and yellow apples, lemon blossom, mineral and baking spice.

Cabernet Franc (12%) and Merlot (6%) add complexity to the Smith-Madrone 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon (SRP \$50). Generous aromas of drying leaves, black currant, cedar and spice leads are joined by coffee on the medium-bodied palate. Tannins are moderate and fine-grained.

The soon-to-be-released Smith-Madrone 2009 Cook's Flat Reserve (\$200) is stellar, loaded with ripe, juicy black currant and cherry, plus cocoa and dark mineral. It's nearly full-bodied with fine, chalky tannins. SJ